

CHAPTER 3

Food Cultures

3.1 Repositioning Potatoes in the PRC

Jakob Klein

In 2015, China's Ministry of Agriculture announced a strategy to transform the white potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) into a staple food for the Chinese nation. Policy documents and promotional literature allege the benefits of raising the potato to the status of grain staple on a par with rice, wheat, and maize. These include furthering national self-sufficiency in grain, helping to alleviate rural poverty, boosting the nutritional health of the population, promoting environmental sustainability in agriculture, and modernising food production.

In this article, which draws on two previous publications (Klein 2019; 2020), I do not assess the successes or claimed benefits of potato 'stapleisation' (*malingshu zhulianghua* 马铃薯主粮化/ *zhushihua* 主食化). Suffice it to say that there is no evidence of a national surge in potato-eating since 2015. Instead, I explore some of the cultural dimensions of the state's attempts to convince the Chinese to eat more potatoes and embrace them as a staple food. How have potatoes historically fit in Chinese foodways, what new meanings do potato-promoters attempt to attach to the tuber, and what might potato promotions tell us about the role of the party-state in China's contemporary food culture?

It is hard to overstate the importance of grains and grain foods to Chinese politics, culture, and social life. The success of the harvests of rice, wheat and (at one time) millet, and their collection, storage, and distribution have been

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central to the operations of Chinese states and their attempts to realise the long-standing moral imperative to ‘nourish the people’ (*yangmin* 养民). In households, cooked grain (*fan* 饭) has been the core feature of daily meals. Typically, people cook and serve unseasoned grain separately from side dishes (*cai* 菜) of vegetables, legumes, and animal flesh. Grain has been vital to the sustenance of human life in this historically largely agrarian society. The sharing and eating of cooked grain foods also nourish relationships of family and kinship. Offerings of cooked grain similarly sustain the ancestors and strengthen their ties with living descendants. *Fan*, be it of rice, wheat, millet, or maize, has stood for ‘food’ itself.

This is not to deny the significance of taro, sweet potatoes, and other roots and tubers. The white potato originated in the Andes and was first introduced in China in the 17th century. By the end of the 19th century, it had become a widespread crop, especially in many inland and highland areas in the south-west, west, and north. Here, its resistance to drought and frost made it popular among farmers, who exchanged it with other farmers and developed numerous local potato cultivars, some of which have recently become state-protected heirloom varieties. Unlike grains, until the 1990s potatoes received little attention from Chinese states or crop scientists. Nevertheless, by the 2000s China’s annual potato crop was larger than that of any other country.

Known by a variety of names, including *yangyu* 洋芋 (‘foreign tuber’), *tudou* 土豆 (‘earth bean’), and *shanyaodan* 山药蛋 (‘yam egg’), white potatoes have become integrated into regional cuisines. Popular potato foods include ‘stir-fried potato slivers’ (*chao tudousi* 炒土豆丝) and ‘three fresh flavours of the earth’ (*di san xian* 地三鲜), a dish of sauteed potatoes, aubergines, and green peppers common in China’s north-east. In parts of Yunnan in the south-west, vendors of barbecued and deep-fried potatoes line the streets of towns and cities, serving them with a variety of dipping sauces they often make themselves.

However, the potato has typically not been regarded in China as a staple food, but as an ingredient fit for side dishes or snacks. Where and when it has been consumed as a core staple, it has often been treated as one of necessity, not of choice. People in Yunnan have told me that they were ‘raised on maize and potatoes’, meaning that they grew up in an impoverished, mountainous area. One young woman who had moved to Kunming, the provincial capital, described to me how she was ridiculed by friends in Kunming for being a potato lover from north-east Yunnan, a notoriously poor part of the province.

State-backed promotions of potatoes encourage the acceptance of the potato-as-staple through productions such as popular science books, cookbooks, trade fairs, and a documentary film, *A Bite of Potato* (*Shejian Shang de Malingshu* 舌尖上的马铃薯, 2015) made in the style of the popular *A Bite of China* series. A key language deployed in these promotions is that of nutrition and health. Potatoes are lauded for being a great source of potassium, vitamin C, and other minerals and vitamins. Some books even claim that the potato helps people to keep slim, avoid hypertension, and protect against certain cancers – claims



Figure 3.1: Deep-fried potatoes at a Kunming street market, 2019. Photograph courtesy of the author.

meant to appeal especially to relatively affluent, sedentary urban populations. The potato, from this perspective, is a modern superfood.

Another language used is culinary, suggesting that people's aversion to the potato as a staple food is not only to do with its symbolic associations with poverty, but also that its taste and texture may not fit easily with Chinese embodied senses of a proper staple food. One culinary approach taken is that potatoes are easily integrated into existing diets: most of the potato staples promoted are familiar foods such as steamed bread or noodles, where a percentage of the wheat or rice flour ordinarily used has been substituted with potato flour. But some of the promotional media celebrate traditional potato staples from rural inland China, such as 'potato dough balls' (*yangyu momo* 洋芋馍馍) from Shaanxi and 'potatoes boiled in an iron wok' (*tieguo zhu yangyu* 铁锅煮洋芋) from Gansu.

Potato promotion is in some ways reminiscent of the social engineering of the high socialist decades of the 1950s–1970s. Yet despite the flourishing of high socialist and nationalist rhetoric under Xi Jinping, the party-state's commitment to a 'socialist market economy' is evident in the potato promotions. Chinese dietary culture is to be modified through state guidance and market mechanisms, not through central planning and rationing. Some of the cookbooks and pamphlets do suggest that it is a citizen's patriotic duty to eat potatoes to enhance the nation's health and its food security. Nevertheless, state

promoters of potato-eating are essentially competing in a marketplace of ideas about diet, health, and cooking, one which includes, for example, low-carbohydrate diets that advocate avoiding potatoes to lose weight.

Even the emphasis on local Chinese potato traditions in some promotional material is less an element of state-sponsored patriotism than a recognition by potato-promoters of the growing desires among middle-stratum Chinese for the ‘authentic,’ ‘pure’ foods of impoverished rural inlands. These desires are themselves driven in part by a crisis-ridden food system that the party-state has notoriously struggled to regulate. Together with potato ‘stapleisation’ itself, such desires have created new opportunities for entrepreneurs, local officials, and gastronomes in marginalised areas such as north-east Yunnan to repackaging their potatoes and potato foods to tourists and urban markets as emblems of local heritage and traditional cuisine, even as these actors may themselves be uneasy about being branded as ‘potato lovers.’

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3.2 Feeding the Future: The Politics of Aspiration in a Chinese Market Street

Samuel Berlin

I wanted to choose an industry where people needed the product every day, so I decided to make food, because people have to eat every day. The way I see it, regardless of how bad the economy is or how bad it might become, I can make food. So, for example, the most inconspicuous thing on the street, mantou 馒头, [...] that is the kind of thing people really need in their lives. Even if you don't buy anything else, you still have to buy mantou.

Doing my doctoral research on Taohua Street,¹ a fading market street in a Shandong county seat was, in a way, easy. As Mr Cai, the shopkeeper in the quote above, notes, *everyone has to eat*, everyone including me, and I ate my way through fieldwork. I arrived in Shandong interested in why people choose to work for themselves – what the aspirations are that guide them out of factories and into the stalls that supply local workers and canteens. As I visited shops for breakfast buns and noodle dinners, I found myself at one point in a broad set of relations that incorporates self-employed small traders into a massive

economic project. People like Mr Cai cope with the precarity engendered by capitalist economics by seeking niches. They make themselves important to the routines of local workers and residents in the areas surrounding Taohua Street and quite literally maintain the workforce by feeding workers from nearby factories and offices. In doing so, they become nodes of production and consumption that produce value and keep it travelling around the economy.

Small-scale entrepreneurs (*getihu* 个体户) have historically played a major role in Chinese economic reform. They were pioneers who, during a period of mass collectivisation, left the countryside to peddle wares in urban areas despite anti-capitalist stigma (Hsu 2007). Today, however, they form a much smaller part of the economy and exist lower down the pecking order. How should we understand the relationship between small-scale entrepreneurial aspiration and the situation of these traders within a national, developmental, and globalised economy?

In my 2021 thesis,² I argue that aspiration is a major motivator behind developmental labour, guiding workers through the vicissitudes of a tumultuous economy. This may seem obvious – of course people work to pursue better futures – but aspiration highlights the contradictions inherent to the coexistence of rapid development and stalling social mobility. On Taohua Street, aspirations appear quite separate from desires for fame or fortune, when what can be desired is limited by what appears realistic for people of limited resources, and aspirations are often modest or even experienced vicariously on behalf of other people's futures. People either delay their own gratification in favour of what appears to be a predestined triumphant future for the economy, the country, and future generations, or they learn to desire within the bounds of what is possible in their circumstances. Both produce action to realise one's own interests, constricted as they may be. This action, I argue, is political. It represents an *everyday class politics* that can be hard to see when the enemy is not an exploitative boss but the low standard of living that development will remedy.

On Taohua Street,² most people see their jobs as, well, jobs. They are a means to an end. Mr Li, who rises at 3am every day to make tofu and soymilk for the breakfast rush, confided in me while stirring coagulant into fresh soymilk early one morning that *he does not actually care for tofu*. Migrant families from Qinghai and Shanxi, who set up shops selling Lanzhou pulled noodles (*lamian* 拉面) and fried bread (*bing* 饼), complain that they had little choice but to learn to make their local delicacies and move eastward to earn a living, even as they shiver at open counters through biting Shandong winters working at jobs they hate, even if their children cannot join them in their toil.

In contrast, there are others who see their shops as luxuries bringing freedom beyond the shackles of the factory or the farm. Self-employment allows shopkeepers to stretch their schedules to fit their families' needs. The shops also provide opportunities to pursue creativity and sociality. Compared to where these traders have been, this is the good life.



Figure 3.2a: Photograph of Taohua Street in Autumn. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Ms Xu's parents put their savings and much free labour into supporting their daughter's sushi and curry shop catering to local schoolchildren, and Ms Xu happily dedicates her meagre free time to developing new recipes. Mrs Yang, a retired teacher, set up a shop to sell her favourite treats – fruits, nuts, and cakes. Perched on her open shopfront, she chats with former students and their parents as they walk home or peruse the market. Friends come to catch up over walnuts and dried persimmons while Mrs Yang waits for customers. But the shop is not just a hobby. Mrs Yang uses it to lure in customers and, as they pay, she delivers her life insurance sales pitch, using the profits to top up her small pension.

Living in a turbulent economy, few on Taohua Street understand their jobs as permanent. They jump between workplaces, in and out of salaried positions (*dagong* 打工), sometimes working for themselves or setting up businesses with spouses, siblings, or cousins, but always with an exit plan. Exit plans and side-hustles are a focus of conversation with friends, neighbours, and relatives. Perhaps some shopkeepers will return to the factories when their businesses finally become untenable. Others will move away, maybe elsewhere in Shandong or, they dream, back home. Few are drawn to the megacities, so often presumed to possess boundless magnetism for people looking to better their fates. They imagine Beijing, Shanghai, and even Qingdao or Jinan as too fast-paced, too expensive, and too unliveable and unwelcoming.



Figure 3.2b: Image shows a motivational poster in a jianbing guozi 煎饼果子 (savory pancake) shop. It reads “Those who conquer the world will be like this: In the beginning, they will they will try to find paradise in their dreams, but in the end, when they are unable to find it, they “will build it themselves. – Eat a jianbing guozi and go conquer the world!” Photograph courtesy of the author.

For those on the lower rungs of this economic system, one’s own future is unreliable. The economy will continue to boom and bust. But in this developmental context, the future of the nation *feels* certain. This is, in the vein of Massumi’s (2010) description of the paradoxical logic of threat, another ‘future birth of the affective fact’. Here, difficult labouring presents are legitimated and motivated by knowledge that development *will* come, development that is of course created by difficult labour carried out in the present.

When possible paths forward feel limited, this foreknowledge of a general future to come enables the formation of aspirations that can be acted upon through labour. As I see it, the actions of the traders of Taohua Street in the present amount to an *everyday politics* of building a better future in pursuit of these traders’ desires and dreams, tempered as they may be by the harsh realities they face. This striving, this labouring for a better future, might not resemble the mass politics of yesteryear. Still, against the limitations of the present, aspiration motivates action in service of one’s own interests or those of valued others. The everyday politics of aspiration has formed the basis for China’s rapid

development. These moments of agency may pass without notice, but leave their trace in your bowl of curry, bag of soymilk, or spring onion pancake.

Notes

- ¹ Pseudonyms have been used for all names.
- ² My doctoral thesis was titled *Developmental Politics and Everyday Life: Working and Aspiring on Taohua Street* and was completed at the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol in 2021.

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3.3 China's Eating Videos and the Rising Number of Single-Person Households in the Age of Urbanisation

Caroline Yiqian Wang

Amidst the global food crisis and skyrocketing trade tensions, the Chinese government has begun to wage war on domestic eating videos and live streams (*chibo* 吃播). Last August, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) reproached *chibo* for encouraging over-consumption, promoting disordered dietary patterns, and losing 'traditional Chinese virtues' of thrift and frugality. Other party-state mouthpieces followed, criticising this rampant phenomenon with President Xi Jinping's remarks on Chinese food security and anti-waste campaigns. According to the *People's Daily* (2020), more than 1.26 million eating clips were posted on *Douyin* (the Chinese version of Tik Tok), 25% of which wooed viewers with 'big stomach king' labels (*dawei wang* 大胃王). The total viewing volume of these videos hit 33.2 billion, with several clips reaching over 7 billion views.

The question then arises: given the many entertainment options at their fingertips, why are contemporary Chinese citizens obsessed with watching people devouring on screen? This essay briefly introduces the development of *chibo* in China and discusses its sociocultural values under the backdrop of Chinese post-reform urbanisation.

Chibo is a direct translation from the Korean term, *mukbang* (the combination of *meokneun*/eating and *bangsong*/broadcast). In 2014, one CCTV news programme introduced the 34-year-old Korean *mukbang* influencer ‘the Diva’ (Park Seo-Yeon), who earned as much as 9,000 US dollars per month by eating huge quantities of food in front of the camera every day. The programme also commented on the promising market of Korean *mukbang* industry and showed multiple clips; soon after, Korean eating live streams began to go viral in China (Choe 2019; Qu 2021). Initially, domestic video-sharing websites (like Youku-Tudou, Ac Fun, and Bilibili) only ‘transported’¹ *mukbang* recordings. The localisation of *mukbang* did not occur until the government espoused the domestic live-streaming industry and e-commerce in late 2015 (Qu 2021). In less than a year, *chibo* was flourishing and had inundated major live-streaming platforms, including Douyu, Kuaishou, and Huya. These companies signed up popular broadcasters and marketed them as internet celebrities to loyal fans. Video-sharing websites continue to be crucial venues where viewers can see people eat Chinese stir-fries, fast food, snacks, etc. According to an independent media poll (Fengniao Survey 2020), all 2,445 respondents had seen *chibo* before, with 77.13% of them identifying as frequent viewers. Undeniably, *chibo* was a burgeoning media industry before the official criticism eventually hit last August. Responding to this signal with strict self-censorship, major media platforms immediately took down the eating videos and labelled both ‘big stomach king’ and ‘*chibo*’ as sensitive keywords that block all search results.

Returning to the discussion, why do these videos attract viewership? First of all, regarding *chibo* as a kind of gluttony is a misinterpretation. Most broadcasters do not start eating right away but begin with placing and introducing dozens of dishes. Having clean and organised plating is the basic requirement for *chibo*; to gain more clicks, broadcasters often prepare visually appealing and diversified cuisines (Choe 2019). Such table arrangements closely resemble prototypical Chinese family banquets. Due to China’s agriculture-centred and lineage-based history, extended families with generations living under one roof often gather around a large table and share 8–16 communal dishes (Farquhar 2002). Meals are further interpreted as cultural signs and everyday performances: multi-course banquets generally embody affluence and well-being, while single servings signify scarcity and misery (Farquhar 2002; Qu 2021).

However, after forty years of reform and opening-up, China’s household structure has undergone dramatic changes, simultaneously affecting the country’s eating routines. In 2015, the percentage of single-person households had risen to 12.57% (Li, Fan and Song 2020). These ‘empty-nest youths’ with similar demographic characteristics – in the range of 20–35 years old, living alone in first-tier cities, busy commuters, having few social contacts, experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress – often have no choice but to adopt the undesirable, humble mode of isolated eating since multi-course meals are neither practical nor convenient (Liu and Luo 2019). ‘Big stomach king’ *chibo* offers a virtual alternative. Watching broadcasters finishing up a whole table of foods helps

these solitary city dwellers temporarily escape from their humble meals and brings them back to hearty family banquets. These eating shows satisfy their gastronomic voyeurism and vicarious desires for enjoying various tastes and an opulent life.

Apart from sensory pleasures, interactions and companionship involved in *chibo* appeal to empty-nest youths as well. In Chinese food cultures, sociality lies in the heart of dining. Group eating enables participants to form parasocial relationships and tighten up emotional bounds. Unfortunately, eating alone deprives modern citizens of their opportunities to have intimate conversations and receive affective support (Lasmane and Antonova 2019; Li 2021). This lack of interpersonal engagement can be made up by multimodal communications facilitated by *chibo*. Typing in live chat rooms, listening to broadcasters' responses, and reading other viewers' comments all promote the active sociality of single eaters. These live chats 'link online and offline worlds' and transform isolated eating into a jointly conducted activity (Choe 2019: 2). Real-time flying comments over uploaded videos (*danmu* 弹幕) further shatter geographic and temporal boundaries between virtual audiences. These virtual chit-chats between viewers are very similar to those informal discourses that happen at real dinner tables. In other words, *chibo* not only replenishes the missing dishes but also fills in the place of separated friends and family members.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, many broadcasters started to include live stream cooking in their *chibo* (Qu 2021). This phenomenon reflects another transformation of Chinese foodways in the age of rapid urbanisation – the loss of home cooking inheritance. Like most food cultures, home kitchens are pivotal to 'authentic' cooking methods and unique family flavours. Nevertheless, as teenagers' participation in housework gives way to academic workloads, and city migration brings forward generational separations, few people in China today spend time in home kitchens with experienced family members. Many millennial youths coming to alien cities barely know how to cook properly. As a result, when they were trapped in their single apartments during the pandemic without the possibility of takeaways or going to restaurants, preparing food became a huge issue. On spotting this, some *chibo* broadcasters quickly launched amateur cooking shows. Novices as well, these broadcasters fumbled with simple stir-fries and stews like most young viewers do. Surprisingly, slip-ups (*fanche* 翻车) became amusing, informal, and relatable moments. Many viewers post 'It's exactly me' or 'It's as if I saw myself cooking' in danmu. Since broadcasters have to 'eat their fruits,' their *chibo* videos are also seen as reliable tests for recipes. If one dish is easy to make and looks delicious, viewers can replicate it by following the broadcaster's recipe. For some empty-nest youths, *chibo* became a crucial venue for acquiring cooking skills from peers, rescuing them from the fractured lineage of home cooking and plight of solitary city lives.

Instead of clamping down on *chibo* and condemning it as a crime of waste and harmful entertainment, I would like to regard it as a mass cultural phenomenon

in response to the country's rapid urbanisation and its associated livelihood issues. Three essential elements of current eating broadcasts – overeating, multimodal interactivity, and amateur cooking tutorials – target urgent needs of empty-nest eaters in major cities across China. Taking a big picture approach, we should also consider the influences of city migration upon traditional Chinese eating patterns and home cooking lineages.

Note

- ¹ 'Transport' (*banyun* 搬运) refers to the activity where Chinese internet users who either live overseas or have access to virtual private networks (VPN) record or download foreign videos and reupload them on domestic websites.

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3.4 Tasting Home in Henan: Exploring Identity Through Shaoguo

Erin Thomason

Aunt Wang had accompanied her son and his young family as domestic support while her son worked in an urban area. When her first daughter-in-law left because of divorce shortly after the birth of her grandson, she took on the boy's full-time care in the absence of his mother. When I asked her what kinds of foods she ate and how she cooked them, she laughed and said, 'Me? I am so *luohou* 落后 (backward or uneducated), I still *shaoguo* 烧锅.'

Shaoguo is both a method and an appliance specifically constructed in Henan homes.¹ The term *shaoguo* is used specifically in Henan and neighbouring provinces to refer to the use of a large stove that burns agricultural refuse to heat a large wok.

I had come to study in a small village in rural Henan province as part of my doctoral research studies investigating the lives of left-behind children and their caretakers, but it seemed that the only conversation that locals wanted to have was about food. I came to realise that food matters not only in the *what*, but also in the *how* and *who*: that is, how is a good meal made? And who is responsible for its making?

I have focused on the method of *shaoguo* in particular because of *shaoguo*'s multivalence to local people. At once a superior and inferior cooking method,



Figure 3.4: Photograph of a *shaoguo*. Photograph courtesy of the author.

it can represent the complex ways that rural people feel about themselves and their way of life.

Biomass stoves, because they make use of agricultural waste and dried twigs, are assumed to be the most basic of technologies and require only a primitive kind of knowledge. Gas and electric stoves, on the other hand, reliant on purchased materials and electric or natural gas infrastructures, were assumed to be an ideal of modernity.

Meaning ‘backward’, ‘undeveloped’, or ‘to lag behind’, the term *luohou* is inherently comparative. To ‘be behind’, one must always be behind something or someone. *Luohou* is utilised in conversations about economic development. This echoes scholarly and popular accounts describing rural space as failures of modernity.

Rural ways of cooking are – as the conversation with Aunt Wang suggests – imagined as barriers to rural reconstruction and technological advancement. Several provinces have launched campaigns to change rural cooking practices, citing air quality concerns and environmental waste.

Biomass stoves were also understood as dirty because they required the storage of agricultural waste. Dried corn stalks and piles of dried cobs usually sat in the kitchen space, attracting mice and spreading a fine dust throughout the kitchen. This dirt was criticised as unsightly and contrary to an orderly and neat rural space.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the failures of biomass stoves, however, most rural women, particularly older rural women, continued to cook with recycled agricultural waste and even preferred this way of cooking. *Shaoguo* was economical, making use of the corn and wheat waste products that were otherwise unused. *Shaoguo* also used a thick iron cooking surface and therefore imparted iron into the daily soups made in them. This nutritional content was important for poor families who did not have regular access to iron-rich foods.

Perhaps most importantly, *shaoguo* created a superior flavour in staple foods. *Shaoguo* is useful in the cooking of two Henan staples: *mo* (steamed bread in Henan dialect, *mantou* 馒头 in Mandarin) and *hetang* (soup in the Henan dialect, made from boiled water and flour, *miantang* 面烫 in Mandarin).²

For wheat-consuming Henan people, these humble staples were not only the food they most enjoyed, but also the foods which felt most like home. Migrants returning from the rice-based cuisine of the south expressed cravings for local staples. In one family meal I attended, the migrant Dawei, recently returned from Guangzhou, stated that even though he did not like the flavour, the bland thick soup, *hetang*, was a part of an experience of being home. ‘When I am home I drink *hetang*, it’s not that I like (*xihuan* 喜欢) it, it’s that I am used to (*xiguan* 习惯) it.’

In multigenerational families affected by migration, older women undertake the majority of food preparation while their daughters-in-law work in the townships and urban centres. Despite the physical demands placed upon older women, these novel divisions of labour facilitate the conservation of traditional

cooking methods such as *shaoguo*. Recently a spate of new urbanised housing units has radically changed the area immediately adjacent to my fieldsite, yet, with few exceptions, new housing in the village continues to have biomass fuel stoves. Younger couples expect the older women of the family to cook most of the meals and thus provide a kitchen optimised for rural cuisine. One family I knew owned an urban-style apartment in the township with a modern gas-fuelled kitchen, but they stayed in their village house so that the older woman could continue to cook in a familiar kitchen with a biofuel stove.

What do cooking methods tell us about belonging in rural spaces affected by migration? For rural people, at once excluded from modernity because of poverty and welcomed into rural life for the same reasons, *shaoguo* is an exemplary indicator of their very exclusion from larger orders of urban or cosmopolitan belonging.

In rural China, *shaoguo* produces unique affordances for community and family belonging – throwing the regional differences in food preferences into stark relief. As particularly immobile and even impractical, biomass stoves are ill-suited to densely populated and fast-paced urban life, creating stark differences in the everyday food of rural and urban areas. Displaced from familiar sensations, returning migrants desire nostalgic foods from their childhood to re-enact a familiar sense-scape and recreate home even if much of their rural homeland has changed. These desires, shared by migrants returning home, have the potential to create a consciousness about rural conditions that may not have been possible without the displacement of migration.

Migration has radically reconfigured gender- and age-based roles and has helped to solidify older women's roles as the provisioners of food. This has supported the conservation of 'traditional' cooking methods like *shaoguo*, so that newly built homes continue to have biomass stoves despite many younger women's concerted efforts to obtain more modern appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators. As these older women are also cooking and caring for young grandchildren, they hold a prominent role in socialising the next generation into what good food tastes, smells, and feels like.

Shaoguo is at once empowering and disenfranchising, as *shaoguo* is imparted with both positive and negative valences. Despite disparaging labels of backward or dirty, older women in rural Henan maintain creative resistance in their cooking tradition that displays the profound resiliency of taste, comfort, and habit. *Shaoguo* is central to the practice of creating home.

Notes

- ¹ In other areas in China, cooking fires may be referred to by the more general term *shaohuo*, to tend a fire (see Oxfeld 2017: 54). In Henan and its neighbouring provinces, however, the replacement of *huo* with *guo* makes the term specifically about cooking, usually referring to the improved cooking stove I describe here.

- ² In Jiatian Village and other areas of Henan, people speak a non-standard dialect. While the dialect is a derivative of Mandarin, many words such as *mo* and *hetang* are regionally specific.

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